AED/LearnLink

ICT Applications for Development

AED/LearnLink uses information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support development. Activities range from public access telecenters to teacher training, professional development, organizational networking, e-commerce, e-government, and institutional capacity building. Lessons from field experiences are shared to contribute to the body of knowledge on using ICTs for development.
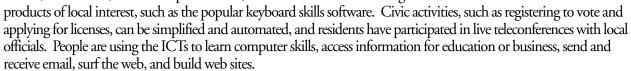
Location: **Paraguay**

Keyword Identifiers: telecenter, municipal decentralization, community development

Purpose: By establishing public information and communication technology (ICT) centers in less advantaged communities in Asunción, this pilot activity was originally conceived to (a) support the decentralization of municipal systems and services, (b) improve communication between citizens and government, and (c) strengthen popular participation in civic activities. Shortly after start-up, local communities took control of the centers, and their purpose evolved, with municipal support, to enabling poorer residents to take advantage of ICTs for accessing and disseminating information, communicating electronically, and benefiting from opportunities for education and lifelong learning.

Description: Twelve Community Learning Centers (CLCs) provide neighborhood residents of Asunción with access to computers, telecommunications, the Internet, and municipal materials, as well as multimedia learning products of local interest, such as the popular keyboard skills software. Civic activities, such as registering to vote and applying for licenses, can be simplified and automated, and residents have participated in live teleconferences with local officials. People are using the ICTs to learn computer skills, access information for education or business, send and receive email, surf the web, and build web sites.

The CLCs are known locally as amic@s, for aulas municipales de información, comunicación y aprendizaje-translated as "municipal classrooms for information, communication, and learning." A play on the word amiga, or "friend" in Spanish, the amic@s are characterized by considerable community involvement and function through lively partnerships between the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The amic@s are neighborhood centers of learning, and each amic@ has a distinct personality reflecting the community in which it is located. The launch of each new CLC was a major community event accompanied by dancing, music, food, and speeches from local dignitaries. The neighborhood celebrated, sometimes with a local priest blessing the center.

Class gathered at a computer

Examples of Asunción's amic@s include:

• Asunción's municipal bus station: The CLC is on the second floor of this busy public place, above the bus gates, shops, video arcades, public telephones, and food stalls. The center's first customers were the homeless children who shine shoes, sell sundries, and even sleep in the station. They visit daily and are learning increasingly sophisticated computer skills, such as surfing the web and creating web pages. A group even chatted with the Mayor in a live teleconference. Their skills are so advanced that the children are providing technical assistance to other visitors.

• Mercado 4: In the city's largest market, the children of merchants and street vendors spend after-school hours on the computer, not hanging around the food stalls on the street. While their mothers sell tomatoes outside, the children are drawing pictures, playing computer games, and using the Internet connection to go online.

• Tablada Nueva: Within a Catholic school near the River Parana, where an enthusiastic, elderly nun, who runs the orphanage next door, also runs the CLC for the students, orphans, and juvenile delinquents.

• Tacumbú: Inside a public school in a neighborhood near the nation's largest prison, this CLC is managed by a steering committee comprised of local residents and municipal, police, military, school, and church officials.

• Bañado Sur: At a primary school near the city's main garbage dump, active community fundraising paid for air conditioning for the CLC. Through a partnership with Catholic University, students teach computer applications to local residents at night.

• Marangatu Rape: In the poorest neighborhood hosting a CLC, inside the city's only municipal school, the amic@ is used by teachers, parents, and students and is accessible to the entire community after school.

Shoeshine boys at the Bus Station amic@ in Asunción

• Santisima Trinidad: A working class neighborhood so pleased to have a CLC that a group voluntarily helped build the center with materials donated by private companies.

• Manzana de la Rivera : Near a large public park and within a cultural center housing a theater, art exhibits, magazine reading room, and public library. On Wednesday afternoons, librarians use the computers to take patrons on virtual visits to museums and other Internet sites.

• Isla de Capri: This CLC is located in a neighborhood public park cherished by the older community-but victimized by recent vandalism.

Throughout the city, members of poor communities have responded enthusiastically to the CLCs, volunteering their time and energy to design, manage, and operate the centers through neighborhood Steering Committees. In 1999, for example, over 3,000 people used the eight CLCs operating that year. In one CLC alone, as many as 360 children per week go to the center after school to explore the science and geography CD-ROMs there. In another, common forms and documents are available, eliminating the need for people to travel downtown and stand in long lines at the city center office. During a recent election, a national electoral database was available at the bus terminal CLC to inform people about the location of their voting place, and it was widely used.

Key Challenges: While the CLCs were originally conceived to make municipal functions and materials available, most were not digitized when the activity launched. Citizen's electronic access to bill paying, license applications, and other local government services and information still awaits an Intranet system, digitization of forms and documents, and a security system to protect private information. Also, financial contributions from the municipality were delayed and reduced due to emergency needs resulting from El Nino. In some areas, infrastructure was insufficient, requiring wireless solutions.

Girls at an Asunción amic@

Lessons Learned: The success of this activity is due to the enthusiastic involvement of local residents, who designed each center to meet the needs of their neighborhood and who run the centers through local Management Committees. A dynamic local coordinator, also essential for success, helped create positive energy and synergy among the municipality, the centers, and a broad band of partners, such as Internet Service Providers (ISPs), schools, the city's major university, libraries and cultural centers, NGOs, the Chamber of Commerce, local media, and the Peace Corps, to name a few. These alliances provided the centers with free Internet access, volunteer training of CLC coordinators by university students, Peace Corps volunteers, and free publicity. Teachers and students, who recognized the CLC's value for education, are among the most enthusiastic visitors, taking advantage of the computer training sessions that most centers offer and the access to information that resource-poor schools cannot provide.

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